

THE MINUET.

BY MARY MAPES DOUGLASS.

Grandma told me all about it,
Told me, so I couldn't doubt it,
How she danced—my grandma danced!—
Long ago.

How she held her pretty head,
How her dainty skirt she spread,
How she turned her little toes—
Smiling little human rose!—
Long ago.

Grandma's hair was bright and sunny;
Dimpled cheeks, too—ah, how sunny!
Really quite a pretty girl,
Long ago.

Bless her! why, she wears a cap,
Grandma does, and takes a nap
Every single day; and yet
Grandma danced the minuet
Long ago.

Now she sits there, rocking, rocking,
Always knitting Grandma's stocking—
(Every girl was taught to knit,
Long ago).

Yet her figure is so neat,
And her way so staid and sweet,
I can almost see her now
Bending to her partner's bow
Long ago.

Grandma says our modern jumping,
Hopping, rushing, whirling, bumping,
Would have shocked the gentle folk
Long ago.

No—they moved with stately grace,
Everything in proper place,
Gliding slowly forward, then
Slowly courtesying back again,
Long ago.

Modern ways are quite alarming,
Grandma says; but boys were charming—
Girls and boys, I mean, of course—
Long ago.

Bravely modest, grandly shy—
What if all of us should try—
Just to feel like those who met
In the graceful minuet
Long ago!

With the minuet in fashion,
Who could fly into a passion!
All would wear the calm they wore
Long ago.

In time to come, if I perchance,
Should tell my grandchild of our dance,
I should really like to say,
"We did it, dear, in some such way."
Long ago.

—St. Nicholas, January.

A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS.

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

So I had four or five days' walking by myself. It was something strange this being thrown so much into my own society. Here was my life, I thought to myself, and what on earth was I to do with it! One humble feeling I certainly had—the conviction of its insignificance; that it was no particular value to any one but the owner, and from his point of view it did not much matter what became of it. These dreadful practical questions have a trick of recurring like recurring decimals. Should I emigrate? I thought to myself. Emigration I felt was the natural outlet for young men; but I had had the superfluous education that unfitted me for a kind of work of which I was quite ignorant. This idea was unwelcome, and I put it away. I think it was now for the first time that the idea was consciously presented to me—suggested to me, I imagine, by that conversation the other evening at the Point—that I ought to look at my limited human life as a whole, make it a work of art if possible, and try and put into it something like a sense of duty and aspiration, that should prove a dominant theory of life ruling all the details. The idea was a novel one, something altogether new to my experience, but it somehow gave me strength and courage. I turned it over and over in my mind several times while I was wandering about in those well-remembered days of old.

CHAPTER III.

The "Chapter of Accidents" was unfolding itself. My next adventure came and proved a damp one. I had formed no settled plan of travel, and was striking almost at random across field and lane as any pretty prospect seemed to open before me; my general idea being that I was to jot off the places of interest mentioned by Murray. But certain things came to pass in this wise.

I had been to see the ruins of an old castle overhanging the river, a famous old castle that almost enabled me to realise the old baronial type which it so vividly recalled. From this castle I could see the promontory of the Point where I had been only a few evenings before with the two ladies. The old castle would have been all the pleasanter if they were still my companions; they would "have made a sunshine in a shady place." A pretty child showed me all about it; with fearless grace she ran along the narrow edge of wall. I could see the view on the right hand expanding into a tawny estuary of the sea, and diminishing on the left almost to a thread of light in the distance. The idea came into my head that I would beat up by the side of the river until I came to some neat town or village on its shore, or to some bridge or ferry that would take me to the opposite bank.

So I went up the river shore, mile after mile, hour after hour. The path sometimes skirted the bank which, with level spaces interspersed,

preserved for a considerable distance the character of a sheer cliff. Now, as I was going along one of those level spaces, meadow-land shadowed by noble timber, a somewhat singular incident came to pass. I heard a strange, strong, sudden sound; a sound as of rushing water—thunderous, unearthly. The noise was behind me, and I looked back in amazement to see what it might be. The river presented a singular phenomenon. There appeared to be a wall of water, almost of a man's stature, gliding onwards with the utmost velocity. I at once recollected—my ramble being about the time of the autumn Equinox—that this must be the *ayer* or bore so well-known on some parts of the coast. The appearance was so striking, and to one previously unacquainted with it even so threatening, that I took at once to my legs, and ran rapidly so as to gain the next cliff. But before I could do so, the water had spread itself over half the meadow, and I was wet through to the knees. I quickly was out of reach; and watching the onward rushing stream I perceived that the banks, where they did not rise to cliffs, were flooded on either side by the stream. The path that skirted the river was now untenable, and I was obliged to get into the high road that ran parallel with the river, so far as a straight line could be parallel with a devious stream. On I went, mile after mile, hour after hour. I did not know that I was on a great ducal property, where the farm-holdings were unusually enormous; and consequently the country-side had for leagues no collection of habitations, but was chiefly diversified by farmhouses big and stately as manor-houses. The only guide that I had was the broad white river, that still gleamed white, although the day had long since waned, and I was again benighted. At last I saw some lights gleaming on the further shore. I thought that perhaps there might be a ferry here, and I shouted and shouted in the hope of attracting attention. At last there came back an answering shout, and I heard in the darkness the clashing of a chain. Presently I heard voices, and was told to go to the steps. I went in the direction of the steps, having positively to wade through two feet of water, and discerned a wall, by which I rightly guessed the flooded steps were situated, which at a dry season went down from the bank into the river. A good-looking young fellow, smoking a cigar, was sitting in the big ferry-boat, one so big that it served for the carriage of cattle and heavy goods, worked, though the river was broad, by a chain. When we arrived on the other side the boat was almost exactly under the projecting gables of a big house, whence were gleaming the lights of which I spoke. I soon perceived that this was a hostel called the Fisherman's Arms, into which I was very glad to get entrance, and proceeded, according to the former precedent, to obviate the bad effects of my wetting. The landlord said that there was only one sitting-room, which was rented by two gentlemen who were fishing; but he had no doubt they would let me have a share in their fire and their apartment.

When I entered, after a courteous message, I found that the fishermen were not only fishers, but also—a very different thing, as my own experience testified—had taken some fish. A large appetising dish of trout was before them; and with an easy kindness they said I had better have some with them, as there was no more in the house. One of the men was the young fellow who, cigar in mouth, had come over in the ferry-boat apparently for the lack of something to do. I had never seen a pleasanter, more contented fellow, sunny as the sunward peach on the wall.

The elder was a different sort of man, quiet, thoughtful, intensely occupied, with an array of books and papers on the table behind him which had overflowed to the tea-table. From red tape around piles of paper I conjectured that he was a barrister taking a holiday to freshen himself up for the beginning of term. They made their headquarters at this fishing inn, whence they had explored a good deal of the country, and had fished, not without success, in the river, having caught several salmon with rod and line in the main river, and lots of trout in the tributary streams.

I had my own little story to tell in answer to their frank confidences. I was a stranger in this part of the country, had never been here before, and only came as a sort of whim. But I had accidentally met a clever man in London, Sir Henry Westlake, who had advised me to take this sort of pedestrian trip; and happening to have his card about me, I took it up and looked at it.

"I know Sir Henry," said the elder of my companions; "he is a singular man, but good and clever; and once he went out of his way to do me a great kindness, though really I had no sort of claim upon him."

This little incident broke the ice, if indeed their kind hospitality had not broken it already. We sat up till quite late at night chatting. I and the younger man had it chiefly to ourselves, until the elder cousin—for that was the connection between them—put aside his papers and went into the conversation with a vigour that atoned for his previous silence. I too was glad to find my tongue again. I had been silent and solitary for some days, and had been inclined to share the opinion of that morbid old gentleman, who declared that conversation was the bane of society. But now that society was ready-made to my hand once more, I enjoyed it as much as in the smoking-room of the club; indeed the talk was of better quality than I think the club could have furnished.

There were just two or three days left of their holidays, and as I had nothing at all to do with my time I easily arranged that I would join them.

The young one said rather unexpectedly, "When Ellis leaves me on Thursday, I am going on to Dorchester to stay with my uncle, who is one of the canons. He is a very kind old man, and will be delighted to see you at dinner on Friday or Saturday. He always tells me to bring any friend I like."

I thought Mr. Blount was a little reckless with his invitations, and I looked inquiringly at the elder man.

"O, you had better go," he said smilingly. "If you are looking at the county, Murray in hand, you ought to see something of the county people. You will have a capital opportunity at the canon's. Cathedral cities are curious places. The city people keep to the city people, and know nothing of the county people. But, on the other hand, the cathedral people are hand in glove with the county people, and know little or nothing of the city people."

"He had better come to the meeting of the Naturals on Wednesday,"—that would be the day after the morrow—"and that will be an opportunity of comparing differences between city and county people."

"Who are the Naturals?" I inquired. "O, that is our county Naturalist Society. They have a field-day on Wednesday at Brey Castle. O, that is great fun. Our favourite Naturalist is to read a paper on local edible snails found near Brey Castle, and originally imported by the Romans. And a celebrated antiquary is coming down on purpose to discuss the style of boot used in the time of the earlier Plantagenets."

"A little dry, isn't it?"

"You're not obliged to listen to it unless you like. The feeding will be better than the reading, I expect. It is quite the best day of the year. You will see our clever heiress, Mary Edgeworth; and if you like I will introduce you. I am a married man myself, and so I am out of the competition; and as for Charley, he is nobody until he gets into the Foreign Office. Then you will see all our county society. You may know Cambridge and London as well as you like; but if you have not lived in the counties you may not understand county society."

"I am told that after all 'county people' are the nicest people out."

"All our county society is really included within very manageable limits. The railways take us about everywhere, and so the whole thing lies in a nutshell. We all know one another by name, and generally by sight. We are not altogether unlike the condition of things in Attica, if you remember your Thicksides—the men of the hills, the men of the plain, and the men of the seaboard. Among the hills we have our nobles—the county only boasts of three—and on the plains the towns, with burgesses; and as for the seaboard, by which I mean the coast of our broad tidal river, why, I am afraid my analogy rather breaks down here. The Earl of Lechmere is our lord-lieutenant—his property stretches from the sea to the hills—very pleasant unassuming people, and often give me a few days' shooting. I hardly suppose they will be at the Naturals; but there will be some Honourable or other to represent them. When we get away from Lord Lechmere's lands there are a great many country squires scattered about, and the parsons here all belong to squires' families, and are as good as squires themselves. You will find that they know the burchers, meeting them at railway and hospital meetings, and all that sort of thing, but you will find that they do not cohere very easily. Bishop, dean and canons of course make common cause with the county people. Our merchants are all on the look-out to buy land and become county people themselves."

So it was settled that we should go to the Naturals.

CHAPTER IV.

Brey Castle presented a very different scene this crowded gala day from the silence and solitude it presented a few evenings ago when I lingered and meditated in its deserted court. Carriage after carriage rolled past the old stone lions, and one gay party after another passed through the old gateway between the turrets. The Naturals mustered in large force, and with less appearance of lunacy than might be imagined from their nickname. It was easy to draw a line of distinction between those who were bent on improving their minds and those who meant to improve the occasion according to their own peculiar theories. There was no mistaking the spectacles, the note-cases, the instruments, the subdued raiment, with the gayer costumes of flirts and butterflies whose researches would hardly extend beyond the geology of a pasty-pie. I was introduced to the President of the Naturals, and I am not sure that I was not there and then elected a Natural myself. As I was entering an old corridor whose windows looked out on the gray barbacan, whom should I meet but Mrs. Percival, that sweet old lady who was with "Mary" at the Point, and in the crowd was "Mary" herself, the cynosure of many eyes.

After hasty kindly greetings, "Now what is the name of the young lady who was with you the other evening?" "Why, surely you know her name!" said Mrs. Percival, with a smile. "That is Mrs. Edgeworth."

"Mrs. Edgeworth!" I exclaimed in wonderment, almost in terror, glancing at the exquisite form in the sumptuous-coloured dress. "Is she married then? Who is her husband?"

"She is a widow," answered the lady. "A widow!" I exclaimed. "She looks as little like a widow as any lady I have ever seen." This was with another glance at the lady's attire.

"She has had a very singular history," said Mrs. Percival, "which goes far to explain one or two things which may appear singular to you. I have known her all my life, and I sometimes have called her the child-wife and sometimes the maid-widow. You could not belong to this part of the country without hearing all about her history. She was married when she was only sixteen to an officer in the Guards. She was wild about him, a spoilt child; and her parents could not refuse her. I cannot say that I cared for him at all myself, nor do I think, if things had turned out differently, that he would have made her a good husband. She was an only child and an heiress, and he was seventeen or eighteen years older than herself,—more than as old again, which I always think is too great a disparity. But, as I said, she was wild about him. I have repeatedly seen cases when quite young girls have been devotedly attached to men old enough to be their fathers. Now Mary Gorst—"

"Mary Gorst!" I exclaimed. "Was she, then, any relation to Mr. Gorst of Amesbury?" And I thought of the pretty place I passed in going from the station.

"The very same; his daughter, his only daughter, whose sad story was known all over the country some five years ago. On the very marriage morning Major Edgeworth, riding over to Amesbury Church with his best man, had an accident with his horse. The branch line had just been finished, and for the first time, perhaps, the animal heard the shrill railway whistle, at least that is what we supposed, for the horse had borne him in safety for years before. He was thrown from his horse on his head, but he gathered himself up all right, and proceeded to church, where the marriage service was performed. The breakfast was passing gaily off, and he was just rising to return thanks for himself and his bride, when he fell back insensible. It was then found out that he must have sustained some serious brain injury from the fall, although the mischief was some hours in showing itself. He never got over that attack. Instead of going on his marriage tour he was carried upstairs in a lamentable condition. Softening of the brain set in, and within six months after the wedding he died. Now I think her peculiar history will account for a little that is peculiar about herself. She is a rich man's only child, and, indeed, she has a considerable independent income of her own in right of the marriage settlement, whereon even the ink was hardly dry when all her hopes of happiness were dashed to the earth by this terrible disaster. It altered her character altogether and at once. From a laughing child she became a grave earnest woman. Her father is so aged and ailing that she has to manage his property as well as her own. She has had many suitors, and though I think she ought to marry again, she gives no encouragement; her peculiar history and position make her very straightforward and independent, and a little autocratic; but I know her genuine worth, and have every reason to think gratefully of her kindness. You must know she has taken rather a fancy to you, Mr. Hylton. She was quite interested by your adventure the other night, and thinks you showed more originality and independence than is to be found among the interesting young men in this part of the country. But here she is." And, looking upward, I saw her moving along the old castle wall, almost broad enough to admit two, and then descend rapidly down the narrow time-worn steps with a free, graceful, careless carriage peculiarly her own.

We were sitting on a ruined buttress of the old castle, overlooking the wide champaign and the broad-flowing peaceful river that flowed just beneath the castle's ancient watergate.

She came and sat down beside us.

I don't know whether there was any consciousness betrayed on my side or on her friend's, but she said quickly and decidedly,

"You have been talking about me."

"Yes, Mrs. Edgeworth," I answered.

"And you know my sad history?"

"Well," I said, "as I suppose all the people here know it, more or less."

"What is your history, Mr. Hylton?"

"I am in the uninteresting position of not possessing a history, Mrs. Edgeworth."

"That can be hardly correct, I think." Then she stamped her little foot somewhat imperiously.

"Tell it to me."

A sudden thought passed through my mind:

"If you want the literal truth, you should have it, coarse, repellent, commonplace; and if you are a mere woman of the world, amusing yourself with me, it may make you take yourself off as soon as you choose, fair lady." Then I spoke:

"Mine is a very commonplace and vulgar history. In my past life I have wasted nearly all my time and all my money; and, like Mr. Micawber, I am waiting for something to turn up."

"That is rather hard things to say against oneself at the age of—"

"Twenty-three."

"I am twenty-three myself, and of course I am getting on to a quarter of a century, and I feel at least as if the century were three-quarters"